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The Continued Costs of Political Stagnation in Egypt

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Recent events in Egypt are again proving that far from championing democratic reforms, the Egyptian government continues to consolidate its own power. The January 29, 2005, arrest of Ayman Nour, a member of the Egyptian People's Assembly and leader of the newly legalized liberal political party, Al Ghad (Tomorrow), serves as yet another example of Egypt's persistent semiauthoritarianism. Police authorities arrested Nour after his parliamentary immunity was stripped from him that same day. The Supreme State Security Office accused him of forging almost 2,000 signatures on his party petition for legalization submitted to the government's Committee for Party Affairs early in 2004. Nour denied the charges, characterizing them as politically motivated. On January 31, a lower court in Cairo extended his detention another forty-five days. Nour's detention, which attracted international attention, came amid a wave of arrests that included nine (alleged) members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood and three young activists of secular human rights organizations. The first group was accused of conducting subversive activities against the Egyptian state (the usual official language used whenever Muslim Brothers are imprisoned), but the three human rights activists were arrested at the annual Cairo Book Fair while peacefully distributing materials that called for substantial constitutional and political reforms.

The circumstances surrounding Nour's arrest and its timing shed light on two major dilemmas of the current political situation in Egypt: the undemocratic nature of the ruling regime and the structural weakness of opposition parties and movements. The first round of the so-called National Dialogue between the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) and the fourteen opposition parties took place between January 31–February 2, 2005, and was intended to discuss issues of legal and political reforms. It did not, however, yield any concrete results.

Reforms on the Fringes

Egypt's political development in the last two years has been marked by stagnation. Partially in response to changing regional and international conditions, the NDP government seemed determined for a time to initiate a series of internal reforms. There was a significant injection of young technocrats into the new cabinet formed in July 2004, which was accompanied by efforts to modernize state structures. However, the policies and programs of the reformist group—mostly mid-career professionals, businessmen, and university staff members centered around the president's son Gamal Mubarak—have proved both fragile and blatantly contradictory to the democratization demands emanating from a wide spectrum of liberal, leftist, and moderate Islamist opposition forces. The government has ignored the wide consensus that exists outside its own constituency concerning the four reform imperatives needed to render Egypt's democratic transformation a realistic project: (1) amending the constitution, (2) initiating direct elections for the presidency, (3) setting limits on the terms of office as well as the powers vested in the president as head of the executive, and (4) changing the laws obstructing the functioning of political parties and professional associations.

The reformers within the NDP do not have a clear vision of the political transformation needed, and they remain part of the ruling establishment that is unwilling to relinquish any of its control over society. Preserving power and securing public order, both structural attributes of semiauthoritarianism, continue to be the fundamental priorities of the Egyptian regime. Throughout the last two years, the inability of opposition forces and civil society actors to mobilize broader constituencies behind these reform imperatives, and subsequently the absence of pressure on the government, has resulted in an overall stagnation of Egyptian politics.

Almost three decades ago, after President Anwar Al Sadat initiated the Open Door Policy in 1976, Egypt appeared to embark on the road to democracy and a market economy. However, since then the ruling regime, including both its military and technocratic components, has favored a more gradual transformation to a limited political pluralism and neoliberal privatization. It succeeded in violently marginalizing opposing political alternatives, which regardless of their specific ideological nature might have been viable within society at different moments of contemporary Egyptian history. Leaving the government's rhetoric aside, the "democratization in spurts" model of the ruling regime has led to no more than minor reforms on the fringes of the political sphere. The system of power relationships and constitutional and legal arrangements organizing political participation remains essentially unchanged and decidedly semiauthoritarian in nature.

"The Call for Constitutional Change Is Futile"

The Egyptian constitution, issued in 1971 and amended since then, vests enormous authority in the president as the head of the state and empowers the executive branch over both the legislative branch and the judiciary. The election of the president remains an uncompetitive process. The People's Assembly nominates the presidential candidate by a two-thirds majority, who is then confirmed in a national referendum. Since 1980, Egypt has had a bicameral parliament, elected in popular elections, but much of the apparent pluralism is cosmetic. In both the People's Assembly and the Consultative Council, the ruling NDP currently has almost 90 percent of the seats. Elections are regularly manipulated in favor of the NDP, and its dominance is further strengthened by the fact that Mubarak is the head of both the state and the party.

The result of this system is an authoritarianism favoring the intermingling of state and party structures. Opposition political parties, if not co-opted and fully controlled by the authorities, are highly restricted in their activities. The Emergency Law (the state of emergency was extended three more years by the People's Assembly on February 23, 2003) prohibits parties from organizing public meetings without prior permission from the ministry of interior and subjects them to direct supervision by state security forces. Any attempt to criticize the regime for its lack of commitment to reform or to publicly articulate alternative political views is discredited with two types of characterizations: either the criticisms or views represent the demands of a handful of isolated intellectuals who have no understanding of what the masses really want or they represent a dangerous attempt on the part of Islamist "elements" to take over society and control the state.

Moreover, the Political Parties Law of 1977 prohibits the legalization of parties based on religious or ethnic identities. Therefore, moderate Islamist movements, which probably have the largest constituency among the Egyptian public, are not permitted to form political parties. The legal framework for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Egypt is governed by Law No. 84 of 2002, which limits the organizational and financial autonomy of civic associations through a series of registration and reporting requirements, further restricting their sphere of influence.

In all these areas, no traces of substantial transformation can be discerned in the last two years of the government's reform policies. The position papers adopted by the ruling NDP at its second annual convention in the summer of 2004 contained nothing beyond a set of token changes. Instead, the regime has recently been stepping up its repression of opposition leaders and movements rallying for constitutional reform and against Mubarak's fifth term, as evidenced by the arrests discussed earlier. In what seems to be the beginning of a new wave of overt authoritarian measures, a characteristic of Mubarak's ruling style since the 1990s, the recent crackdown on opposition movements and figures is clearly designed to limit the existing public space available for the articulation of democratic alternatives. Such measures include reverting to draconian harassment methods such as detentions, dawn visits by security forces, and torture. In an interview published in the semigovernmental daily newspaper *Al Abram* on January 30, 2005, President Mubarak described the call for constitutional change as "futile" and criticized those who advocate it as "jeopardizing national interests."

Democratic Rhetoric for a Stagnant Polity

The major legitimizing strategy for the Egyptian model of "democratization" has been twofold: one, systematically evoke the well-worn mantra that economic reforms must come before political reform, and two, consistently maintain that the population needs to be prepared for democracy before reforms can take place. It is difficult to find substantial differences between the apologetic appraisals for restricted pluralism that dominated the political sphere during the 1970s and 1980s and the approach of the allegedly reform-oriented cabinet of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif (since July 2004) with its one-sided emphasis on economic modernization. The notion that "Egyptians need bread, not freedom of association" seems to be the official credo of the regime in portraying itself as the legitimate representative of the real needs of the Egyptian society.

The government's economic policies, however, which are dominated by a neoliberal approach, have marginalized large segments of the population. Privatization is posited as the ultimate key to economic growth, whereas gross disparities in the distribution of wealth,

unemployment, and poverty and the increasing marginalization of the middle classes are absent from any discussion. According to the UN Development Program's Human Poverty Index, 30.9 percent of the population lives below the poverty level. Under such conditions, ignoring the social dimensions of the market economy ultimately results in the lack of popular support for implemented reforms. The transformation to a socially responsible market economy is just as problematic and ambivalent as the democratization process has been. Since 1976 the state has been retreating from the economic sphere and attempting to consolidate privatization and liberalization. However, throughout the last three decades, and with the exception of the first half of the 1990s, the performance of the major sectors of the Egyptian economy has been deteriorating. Lack of vision, insufficient market regulations, and divergent perceptions and interests within the ruling elite have created the conditions for the emergence of an "anything goes" capitalist transformation.

In defending its approach, the ruling regime depends on the notion of Egyptian exceptionalism. The "Egyptian way to democratic transformation" formula is systematically put forward by leading regime figures to justify cosmetic and minor steps as the gradualism needed to introduce democratization measures to an Arab-Muslim society whose majority is not demanding democracy. However, a go-slow approach without a clear timetable and a clear understanding of the changes that are needed, such as amending the constitution and opening up the political sphere for new parties by abolishing existing restrictive mechanisms, remains a corrupt, apologetic defense of authoritarianism.

The events of the last two years clearly demonstrate that these "democracy-containment" strategies have been extremely effective for the Egyptian government. For example, Western pressure on Mubarak to democratize has remained firmly in the realm of rhetoric and has not moved toward political conditionality, and democratic opposition movements with large constituencies are still absent in Egypt.

"We Are Not Weaker than the Ukrainians!"

In addition to restrictions imposed by the government, both opposition movements and civil society actors face various internal dilemmas. Although the party system is fundamentally established and shows a moderate degree of fragmentation, the NDP dominates it with its strong hold over the legislative and the executive branches. The four major opposition parties—the liberal Al Wafd Party, the leftist National Progressive Unionist Party, the Arab Nasserist Party, and the Al Ghad Party—are structurally weak and lack constituencies large enough to mobilize popular support. Ten other small parties are active, but their numbers and political relevance are inconsequential.

In contrast, there are approximately 16,000 registered civic associations. Even by regional standards, however, the diversified topography of vital social interests is still underrepresented; the poor, the weak, the marginalized, and the rural constituencies are excluded from the system. In the 1950s and 1960s the state functioned as the major representative of these groups, but since the Open Door Policy began in 1976, the state has been retreating from various social spheres with no viable substitutes taking its place. Representation of interests has become a monopoly of powerful political and economic elites—a dangerous situation considering that the exclusion of large segments of the Egyptian population has always resulted in social unrest, radical currents, and political apathy.

Civil society groups encounter both state restrictions and popular distrust. Through an efficient conglomerate of legal and political measures, the state controls the scope and content of activities performed by civic organizations. They tend to remain centered in urban areas and oriented toward the middle class. By contrast, traditional and modern Islamist networks such as charity organizations and cultural centers are better rooted in the social fabric of Egyptian society and therefore are potentially more able to create social capital than are other nongovernmental actors. Within the Islamist spectrum, in contrast to other countries of the region, the political relevance of radical Islamism in Egypt has been declining in recent years. The last wave of radical Islamist-motivated violence can be dated back to the first half of the 1990s. Government counter violence and repressive policies succeeded in destroying the power base of the radical groups. Most recently, a significant process of rethinking the radical Islamist legacy and of questioning the usage of violence for political objectives has been taking place among members of both al-Jama'at al-Islamiyya and Al Jihad Group. This revisionism has contributed to decreasing religious-motivated militancy. Moderate forces, especially younger generations in the Muslim Brotherhood and the New Wasat (Center) Party, have been gaining political ground in recent years. However, under the current regime, Islamists still do not have the legal and institutional instruments at hand to use their influence in concrete ways.

Moreover, democratic norms and procedures are contested in the Egyptian public sphere and do not enjoy a relatively high degree of acceptance. Concepts such as democracy, good governance, and pluralism evoke, at least partially, distrust among the majority of Egyptian citizens because of the government's systematic misuse of these principle. Two other factors contribute to this alarming reality. First, religious-based perceptions of society and polity, which ultimately stand for an alternative normative order, appeal to a large portion of the population. Second, the prevailing political culture since the 1950s is one of submission and fear of the ruler. A series of polls conducted in summer 2004 by Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies show that almost 60 percent of Egyptians viewed democratic norms and procedures as less important than combating poverty, campaigning against corruption, and improving the public education system. For example, the newly founded Egyptian Movement for Change Kifaya (Enough) attracted fewer than 500 people for its rally on December 12, 2004, that was organized to demand constitutional and political reforms.

Liberal politician Muhammad Farid Hassanin, former Wafd Party member and current leading figure in the Al Ghad Party, recently put forward the slogan: "We are not weaker than the Ukrainians" in an effort to demonstrate the readiness of Egyptians to fight for their democratic rights. Taking contemporary political realities in Egypt seriously, unfortunately, does not lend him much credibility.

Risks and Potentials

Egypt's political conditions have not evolved significantly in the direction of democracy in the last two years, and they instead present a model of semiauthoritarian stagnation. To its credit, Egypt has maintained stability in an explosive region, but it still faces a set of major political and socioeconomic challenges. The political leadership—the president and the ruling NDP—has managed to contain opposition movements and to rule undemocratically with limited tradeoffs regionally and internationally.

Egypt is so geostrategically important that it can neither be ignored nor subjected to pressure. Government reform policies stop short of introducing substantial changes into the

political power structure and the restrictive patterns of political participation prevailing in the country. Government officials have a good command of democracy-based rhetoric and know how to celebrate cosmetic changes as if they were major events on the road to democratization. And hopes that a generational change in the aging political leadership of Egypt might lead to more readiness to undertake real democratic reforms are currently withering away, just as expectations that external pressure might pave the way to democracy. The experiences of the last two years negate both scenarios.

Apparently, the only way to end the current stalemate is to mobilize large constituencies for political reform. Opposition parties and civil society actors, however, are either co-opted or marginalized. Moderate Islamists have the potential to reach out to considerable constituencies, but they are suppressed by the government's security forces and have rather limited room for maneuver. The popular uprisings of the 1970s and the 1980s are the exceptions in Egyptian history. On the socioeconomic side, the ruling elite's current neoliberal approach might lead to improvements in the overall performance of the market economy and result in a better and more transparent economy, but if it ignores poverty, inequality, and unemployment in the process it might also result in accelerated levels of social conflict. The Egyptian regime, however, has often proven its capacity to bargain on long-term economic objectives when social conditions start to be alarming because above all preserving its power remains its first priority. ■

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